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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 19, 2010

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20585

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

I write you today with great urgency regarding Grand Lake St. Marys in Mercer and Auglaize counties in Western Ohio. Grand Lake St. Marys is currently experiencing a severe outbreak of cyanobacteria—commonly referred to as blue-green algae—that is having severe effects on the local economy.

By some estimates, tourism at Grand Lake St. Marys contributes more than \$200 million to the state's economy. Yet, the blue-green algae blooms that have occurred over the past three summers are having a substantial effect on local business due to a dramatic decline in visitors to the lake. The blue-green algae has rendered the lake unswimmable, and puts those who rely on the lake for boating, fishing, and drinking water at risk. It is imperative for those who use the lake and small businesses dependent on lake that immediate action be taken to mitigate and eliminate this toxic algae.

Over the past three years, I have supported a special initiative for Grand Lake St. Marys under the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to increase water quality monitoring and reduce runoff by enrolling more farmers in conservation programs. This funding has resulted in thousands of additional acres being planted with runoff mitigating cover crops and hundreds of other practices that improve water quality in the lake. The demand and ongoing interest in the program is a signal of its success.

These steps are making a clear difference; however, it is apparent that the urgency of the situation calls for additional action. To prevent the further deterioration of the lake and harm to local businesses, I ask that you immediately dedicate further funding for critical conservation programs in the watershed to address issues of nitrogen and phosphorous pollution. Additionally, it is critical that extensive and comprehensive outreach is conducted in the area to ensure that all agricultural producers are given the opportunity to enroll. Engagement of all concerned about the health of the lake and local economy is necessary if we are to make significant reductions in blue-green algae incidents during the summer months.

Your time at USDA has been marked by a strong commitment to conservation and rural development initiatives. The unfortunate water quality issues at Grand Lake St. Marys are a prime example of the intersection of these two important programs. I appreciate your past work and I look forward to working with you and Governor Strickland as we work to dramatically improve water quality, reduce the public health risks, and revive the local economies that have been harmed by this preventable occurrence.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sherrod Brown". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sherrod Brown
United States Senator